i looked for it on all fours

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by canimo

Summary

"There's no limit to what John Egan can take. John Egan can take a shovel to the head. He can take a German cigarette. He can take a plane getting shot to hell, plummeting to the ground. He can take Air Exec as long as he can shove it up Hap Arnold's ass. He can take the loneliness and the jealousy and the rage and the stupid fucking war and these stupid fucking Nazis and the goddamn cold and the feeling he gets sometimes, the absolute certainty that hits him like a bullet every so often, that he's already dead, and this is Purgatory.

He can take it all. He can take it when Buck says he won't escape, won't even think about it, because he wants to make it back to Marge alive — to hell with John, already dead and rotting in front of him. He can take that, too."

In which John Egan wants and wants and wants.

Notes

i feel like i say this with every fic but i am truly so sick of looking at this LMAO. does it need more revision? yes. am i going to give it that? absolutely not.

anyway content warnings for depictions of violence and gore, bucky-typical mental illness, alcohol, and general homophobia.

See the end of the work for more notes

He takes Buck the long way home.

It's early enough in their relationship that John sometimes has trouble remembering to call him Buck. It might have been easier if there was actually a Buck-from-Manitowoc that looked like Gale Cleven, but there was no Buck-from-Manitowoc and certainly no one that looked like Gale Cleven. John could give the game up, admit that this "Buck" thing was all a bit, a joke to confuse people and annoy the guy with a stick up his ass, but that would mean giving up Buck. He's tied them together with this nickname — the two Bucks, Bucky-and-Buck — and it gives him an excuse to sit too close to him, to throw an arm around his shoulder, to ask him to go to back to base with John, to let John drive him home, to take the scenic route.

In the dim light of a San Antonio bar, that impenetrable mask Buck always wears slips, a blink-and-you-miss-it smile on his lips, and he says, "If you insist."

"I do insist," John says with a grin.

So they leave. John drives them far enough out that the city is a twinkle on the horizon like a cluster of stars, far enough that some of the actual stars above them come out of hiding. He babbles mindlessly about anything at all — the woman he danced with, the man at the far end of the bar, their CO's strange runner — and he throws pauses into his monologue in case Buck wants to say anything. He doesn't, so John keeps talking.

It's early enough in their relationship that John can still tap out if he wants to. And he does want to, a little bit. He found out tonight that Gale Cleven doesn't drink or gamble or dance or sing, which is just about all John does. It doesn't seem like Buck likes him much, either, if the silence is anything to go by, so John may just have to content himself with his stupid nickname prank and move on to greener pastures.

But Buck taps his arm as they start approaching base and says "Turn left" when they should be turning right. John follows the orders without hesitation and lets the man direct him to a clearing far away from the city lights. Buck reaches over and turns off the engine, then, keys still in hand, tilts his head up to the night sky.

For a long moment, they are silent. John breaks first.

"What are you doing?"

Buck shushes him and pushes him back against the car's seats. John goes easily with a grin. Another beat of silence, and then —

"There it is," Buck murmurs. He points at a patch of sky that, to John, looks like any other. "Canis Major."

"Where is it?"

"That bright star there. That's its neck."

John sees it. "I don't see it."

Buck sighs in exasperation, and John's grin widens. "Brightest star in the sky, Egan."

"Oh, there it is."

"Sure." Buck relaxes against his seat. He sticks his hands back in his pocket, keys jingling. "Orion right next to it. Hunter and his dog."

John doesn't bother asking where Orion is. Instead, he says, "Not a bad place to end up."

Out of the corner of his eye, John sees Buck turn to look at him. He resists the urge to look back, tries to stare pensively off into the distance and give Buck a taste of his own medicine.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, spending eternity with your dog. Not too bad," John explains. "And, hey, the dog spending eternity with its master. It probably loves that shit. Man's best friend and all that."

Buck hums and says nothing else. John can't resist the urge anymore — he looks over, but Buck's got his eyes on the sky again, mask on and expression unreadable.

"We'll be flying up there," John says. "With the hunters and the dogs and the Big Dippers and whatever the hell else is up there. Dropping bombs down on poor schmucks like us."

"Hell of a thing," Buck says.

"Hell of a thing."

They fall silent. Buck's eyes search the sky, and John watches, trying to figure out what he's looking for and finding nothing. It's early

enough in their relationship that he can pretend the tug in his gut means nothing, that none of this means anything.

Eventually, Buck says, “We should head back.” He turns and sees John watching him, and his expression gives nothing away.

John nods and holds out his hand. When Buck gives him a strange look, he says, “I need the keys.”

Buck blinks at him then pulls the keys out of his pocket like he’d forgotten they’re there. He seems about as sheepish as Gale Cleven can get, and he hands them over.

As he starts the engine, John takes his free hand and waves it up at the stars. “Say goodbye to Orion and Canis Major, Buck.”

It gets a little smirk out of him. “Don’t think they’re going anywhere, Bucky.”

(He’s right, of course. When John goes out the next night, and the next, and the next, they’re still there. Until one day a few months down the line, he looks up at the sky and realizes Orion and his dog have disappeared beyond the horizon line.)

When he’s flying up there, dropping bombs on poor German schmucks, there’s a moment where he swerves the plane out of the line of fire, and suddenly he’s staring directly into the sun. He’s closer to it than he’s ever been, and colder somehow, the same way he’s both weightless and terrifyingly beholden to gravity. In flight school, he learned about wind resistance. Passing through the air creates friction — who would’ve thought?

He didn’t learn about that in college. He didn’t learn much of anything in college. He didn’t learn about how blood splatters hot when your co-pilot’s face gets blown off, how it cools off quick, how it will mix with the trickle of blood trailing down from your temple, how when you wash off later you will not know whose blood is whose.

After interrogation, when the world gets quiet again, he thinks a lot about the fact that they’re flying in a tin can thousands of feet in the air, how there’s nothing but air surrounding them, how it’s only

modern miracles holding him up. He thinks about Orion in the night sky and wonders if being a constellation feels a bit like being a pilot. No, he decides, it doesn't. Constellations are outlines in the shape of humanity. Pilots have too much human in them — too much blood and guts and skin, too much heart pumping, too much adrenaline, too much sweat. His co-pilot's face half blown off. Too much blood. He wanted to be a constellation, once upon a time, but that dream is long gone. Now, he just wants to be human. He wants the blood and guts and skin. He wants to drink and dance and sing and fuck — he wants all the carnal pleasure the priests warned him about.

There's one carnal pleasure he can't have. Not for lack of trying. That carnal pleasure is flying over the Atlantic to get his chance to be blown out of the sky. That carnal pleasure makes him feel more human and less human at the same time, like he's so full of it that he has to empty it out. A human sacrifice in the face of God. Just once, John would like Gale to lose all control and just punch him in the fucking face. Skin purple, blood spilling out behind it. He thinks about Gale's face half blown off. He gets drunk.

He gets drunk in London with a beautiful Polish woman, and then he has sex with her. Carnal pleasures.

When the sirens sound, they don't go to the bomb shelters. There's something hollow in her expression that John recognizes, and there's something hollow about the sounds of bombs exploding. He thinks about that night not too long ago, a bike race on an Air Force base, the sirens sounding right before the finish line, explosions like fireworks as Gale told John how similar he is to his piece of shit dad. He doesn't remember the bombs sounding so hollow then.

He remembers his muscles getting sore from grinning, the spike of adrenaline as he realized Buck was getting up, then pulled him down, the full weight of a grown man slamming him into the ground. He remembers staring at Gale, willing him to look back, to believe him for just once in their lives. What Gale doesn't understand is that John is holding onto him. A fist in his shirt, an arm around his shoulder. They can't die, because John is holding on, pulling them back to earth.

That's how he knows he won't die by a German bomb in London. For

the night, at least, Polina is holding on as she fucks him, and he holds her back. Maybe this is why Gale sent him to London. So he could find someone to hold onto who would actually hold him back.

This is how he knows he's the reason Buck went down. There was no one holding onto him.

His mother warned him. She always said he would go too far, run too fast, drink too much, punch too hard, and it would be the end of him.

He wishes she would have warned him of loving too much. But then again, no one, not even himself, would have thought him capable of that.

As night falls over Bumfuck Nowhere, Germany, John finally finds a little stream.

It's bitterly cold, but he washes his hands until they are red-raw, does his best to get some grime off his face, and finally allows himself a drink of water. It looks clean and tastes clean, but even if it weren't, he'd drink anyway. The only liquid he had on him when he landed was a half full flask of whiskey.

Once he's done drinking for the time being, he takes a few swigs of whiskey and pours out the rest of it. The liquor hits his empty stomach hard as he washes out the flask a few times, fills it with water, and tucks it back into his pocket.

There was cloud cover all day, so it gets dark quickly, no moonlight to replace the sun. He crouches on a rock on the shore and tries to plan ahead: if he keeps moving, he'll have the cover of night, but that would mean sleeping during the day. More people would be out and he would be unconscious and unaware. Then again, if he's moving during the day, there's a greater chance of getting spotted. Either way, it seems, he's an easy target.

"Fuck," he whispers. It's half an expression of frustration and half a

way to remind himself that he's real.

When he first landed in Greenland, his first step onto a landmass other than North America, there was a moment where he felt something strangely like vertigo. For a split second, he was acutely aware of the distance between him and home, separated by an ocean and thousands of years of history and customs, and he was unmoored by the vastness of the world. Then someone called his name, and he returned to his body.

Being in Germany was a bit like this. The terrain was entirely unfamiliar, he had no map to guide him, and whenever he heard human voices it was in a language he didn't understand. He was a gnat in a country that wanted to swallow him whole.

The rock he's sitting on is cold and he's freezing his ass off. The weight of the flask and the sound of water and the looming trees around him remind him of the night he enlisted. About twenty minutes south of Manitowoc proper is a quiet stretch of land on the west shore of Lake Michigan. It is mostly rocky, bad for both bathers and swimmers, so anyone who stumbles upon it does not stay very long. It is quiet and out of the way, and it was where he went to hide.

He didn't tell anyone he went and joined up. He didn't want to deal with any of it yet: his friends' claps on the back, his mom's and his sister's sad eyes, his dad's lecture about finally growing up and learning discipline. For once in his life, he wanted to be alone with the full weight of his decision.

But it was winter in Wisconsin. The wind was cold, and the water, too, and the flask of whiskey he took with him wasn't warming him up. He got irritated, and instead of coming to terms with his mortality and the weight of impending war and shit, he just felt fucking cold. The only thing that stopped him from hiking back to his car and going back home is the fact that the whiskey had hit harder than he expected. He spent a miserable night alone, and when he drove back into town, it was past midnight and he felt like the last person on Earth.

John looks up at the German sky. If the clouds weren't in the way, he'd look for Orion and his dog. But they are in the way, and besides, stars can't help him.

He doesn't think he's going to die on German soil. His faith in God is shaky, but he believes without a doubt that someone out there is

determined to force him through life without Gale.

His first dream, as it were, takes place on the west shore of lake Michigan, twenty minutes south of Manitowoc proper. It doesn't look real, though. It's more like a film set. That could be due to the fact that he hadn't been home in a year or due to the fact that Buck is there.

He knows it's summer because there's crickets chirping in the woods behind him. It's dark, but the moon is bright, and without looking he knows Buck is just behind him, sitting on a rock half-submerged in the water. John is sitting in the water right by him. He can feel Buck's presence on his arm as he leans back. They are stripped to their skivvies.

There might have been more happening; he has a vague impression that there was talking at some point in this dream, but the details faded in the minutes after waking up. What he does retain is distressing.

He is saying something when he feels Buck's hand on his shoulder. He looks up and to his right, and his eyes land right on Buck's. Their faces are mere inches away. Buck's other hand comes up and lands on John's cheek, feather-light.

"John," he says, his voice low.

John is about to say something, and then he is silenced. He wakes up soon after their lips meet.

The dream haunts him for a week, until he gets to leave base and find a girl and kiss her instead. The dream is not a revelation, not by a long shot, but he usually has better control of himself. He usually can go about his day without suddenly remembering the image of Buck leaning in. When he does find a girl that Saturday, a pretty brunette named Eloise who wants to fly as close to the sun as he does, he feels the world right itself. Nothing has changed, and nothing will change, if he can just get a fucking grip.

He goes another few weeks without incident, until there's another dream. A few others. People chalk up his odd behavior to anything

from alcohol to blue balls. He lets them.

No one knows about these dreams, with one exception.

Curtis Biddick figures him out embarrassingly quick. All it takes is one night on the town, a couple hours watching John try and fail to stay away from Buck, and he feels sure enough in his conclusions to corner John when he's taking a piss in the alley beside the dive bar and say, "You got it bad for Cleven, don't you, Major?"

John is on the drunk side of tipsy at this point in the night, and he blinks a few times before he remembers to put his dick away and respond. All he comes up with is a weak, "Sorry?"

Biddick smiles. It doesn't seem particularly mean, but John doesn't presume to know him well enough to bet on it.

"I'm just saying," Biddick says slowly. "Seems like you like him an awful lot. Sir."

John sizes the man up. He could pull rank easily, but he hates doing that. The next option he sees is a brawl, which would be unfortunate, but he doesn't much feel like a dishonorable discharge if he's not at least going to get a good fuck out of it. He's more than willing to throw some fucking lieutenant under the bus to prevent it.

"Well," John says, steadying his feet and preparing for the worst, "what are you gonna do about it?"

"Not a goddamn thing." John must look surprised, because Biddick laughs, loud and boisterous. "I've been around the fuckin' block, Major. You ain't the first, you won't be the last."

The hackles John put up slowly lower, and he feels a cautious grin start to spread on his face. "Who was the first?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Biddick says slyly. John laughs, and he's feeling okay until Biddick continues, his tone becoming more serious. "I don't like getting my nose in other people's business, you know."

John nods. The purpose of the conversation is starting to dawn on him. He stays silent.

“I wouldn’t normally say nothing,” Biddick says, “but, you know, if I figured it out, and I just got here….”

“Yeah, I get it,” John says. “Keep it in my pants.”

Biddick nods uncomfortably. “That would be my suggestion, sir.”

Whatever brief spurt of relief John had felt is so far gone it might as well have never been real. He stands there and stares at the cigarette butts and broken glass and dirty puddles on the asphalt, and he thinks about all the times he’d ever given a blowjob or a handjob in an alley just like this, and he feels sick to his stomach with the wave of disgust that passes over him. It’s not often that he gives himself to the shame, but with a lieutenant staring at him and the smell of his own piss in his nostrils, he feels like a sideshow freak.

“You gonna tell Buck?” John asks, even though he knows the answer.

“What should I tell him?” Biddick says.

John shrugs. “I don’t know. D’you think he’s gotta keep it in his pants, too?”

Biddick takes a deep breath that John recognizes from all the times his sister has found him drunk and ornery. “I’m not sure you should go barking up that tree, sir,” he says after a long pause.

It makes John smile sharp and bitter, but he knows from experience it comes across as careless and mean. He does feel a bit like a dog, one that’s cornered and feral, one that’s been chased away from the house of a man who tossed a half-eaten sandwich toward him, and he does feel a bit like baring his teeth and fighting. But there’s a larger part of him that’s too drunk and tired and lovesick to bother.

So, he takes a few steps towards Biddick and throws an arm around the man’s shoulder. “You’re smarter than you look, Lieutenant,” he says. “I think I owe you a beer.”

If John were in a better mood, he’d laugh at the look on Biddick’s face. He’s wearing a strange frown like he can’t decide whether he’s offended or worried or relieved.

John is expecting him to turn down the offer, and he’s pleasantly surprised when Biddick catches his eye and says, “Won’t say no to a free beer, sir.”

He grins.

When they come back inside, after Biddick has a fresh bottle of beer, John takes his seat beside Gale and plasters a smile on his face. Gale studies John first, then Biddick, and the moment he gets a chance, he leans in and murmurs in John's ear, "Everything alright?"

John turns his head to find Buck too close. He can smell the man's aftershave, count his eyelashes, and if he leaned in a little closer, their foreheads would be pressed together.

A grin stretches awkward and fake on John's lips. "Peachy," he says. "Don't you worry your pretty little head."

The problem is that John doesn't know how to not go barking up trees. John doesn't know how to not bark. Sometimes it feels like John has spent his entire life barking. Curt says, "Okay, Meatball," for a reason. Curt punches him for a reason. Gale Cleven is his best friend. No one knows him like Curt does.

Gale has a white knuckle grip on life. The first time John ever really saw him falter was after his first mission. He asked, "Why didn't you tell me?" and John wanted to say, "I gave you my lucky deuce."

The war is creating hairline fractures all over Buck. It takes a mission to see him shaken. It takes a bombing to learn about his dad. At the rate they're going, it'll take John's dead body to get him to open up about his favorite fucking color.

John takes what he can get. He learns how Buck takes his coffee. He pays attention to Buck's hands, and he carefully notes which songs make him tap his fingers to the rhythm. He makes jokes to find out what makes Buck laugh. He can't even get mad when other people make Buck laugh. He has to take as much of Buck's smile as he can get.

He'll take best man, like he took silence before that, and best friend

before that.

There's no limit to what John Egan can take. John Egan can take a shovel to the head. He can take a German cigarette. He can take a plane getting shot to hell, plummeting to the ground. He can take Air Exec as long as he can shove it up Hap Arnold's ass. He can take the loneliness and the jealousy and the rage and the stupid fucking war and these stupid fucking Nazis and the goddamn cold and the feeling he gets sometimes, the absolute certainty that hits him like a bullet every so often, that he's already dead, and this is Purgatory.

He can take it all. He can take it when Buck says he won't escape, won't even think about it, because he wants to make it back to Marge alive — to hell with John, already dead and rotting in front of him. He can take that, too.

It doesn't matter how often he gets shot down. Side effect of being a pilot: getting shot down doesn't faze him much anymore.

His legs are unsteady beneath him as Buck leads him back to their bunk. Despite this, he feels like he can do anything and everything. It was a good night; he danced with a woman who didn't mind his singing and didn't mind his leaving her for Buck, he won two rounds of darts, and someone (he's not sure who) got shots for all of them.

He's on top of the world. There's a tug in his gut that he'll call gravity. He lets it pull him down.

As he digs his heels in to slow the pair of them down, places his hands on Gale's shoulders to rearrange them, he feels the churning in his stomach, the adrenaline rush of a free fall.

Gale has developed a sixth sense for this, and he knows where it's going before John can straighten himself out. He looks at John with a warning, clear as day even in the weak moonlight, and all John can do is smile. He's never thought of himself as the kind of guy to self-immolate, but he's getting addicted to it, to the feeling of Gale looking right at him. It doesn't matter much that Gale doesn't seem to like what he sees.

"Gale—"

“You’re drunk, Bucky.”

“Gale Cleven, I—”

Gale tries to step back. John is holding too hard, though, and ends up stumbling forward with him. “Don’t say anything you’ll regret in the morning,” Gale says, trying to pluck off John’s hands. It doesn’t work; all John really wants to do is hold them.

“I’d never regret it, Buck,” he murmurs, looking down where his fingers are tangled with Gale’s. Gale pulls away. This time, John lets him go.

“Yes, you would.”

“I wouldn’t,” he insists. There’s about a yard between him and Buck that feels like a canyon. Gale’s jaw is clenched, the only sign that he’s mad at John for trying this again. Otherwise his face is expressionless. It’s a face John has memorized, so he repeats it, softer: “I wouldn’t. Not if it’s you.”

Gale sighs. He stares at John for a long minute, and John basks in it. He feels like shit now, like he’s dirty and needs to be scrubbed raw inside out, but Gale’s eyes are on him.

“You should go to bed,” he says finally.

John huffs out a laugh. “Sure. Yeah.” He waits for Gale to come over and steady him, but it never happens, so he starts stumbling his way back to barracks on his own. Gale follows from a safe distance.

When they get there, John turns and asks, “Do you hate that I called you ‘Buck?’”

Like all English nights, this one is cloudy. There’s no moonlight to see by, and blackout is, as always, in effect. He can’t see Gale’s eyes as he delivers the final blow.

Gale says, “Good night, John,” and walks away.

Marge is an angel; he tells her as much, and her laugh moves through the air the same way Gale’s does. When the two of them get married,

they will have golden blond babies like Renaissance cherubs while John sits with the rest of the godless degenerate art. He can tell by the way Gale grips his Coke bottle that he thinks John is flirting with her. It's so far from the truth, John nearly laughs at the thought.

As soon as he can, John excuses himself and lets the golden couple be golden in their booth in the back. He catches Curt's eye when he's a few steps away from the table, mimes taking a drink, and watches with relief as Curt heads toward the bar and orders four shots of something.

"You lasted longer than I thought," he says as soon as John's close enough to hear. He hands one shot — vodka, he thinks as it slides down his throat — then another to John. "You were making that face, though."

John wrinkles his nose. He knows exactly what Curt's talking about. "I was not."

Curt snorts. "If that helps you sleep at night."

John takes another one of those shots out of Curt's hands, ignoring the man's protests that those two were meant for him. He downs it, then leans in close to Curt. "What's the point of having you as a friend if you aren't going to support me?"

"I bought you three fucking shots," Curt says. He quickly drinks the last one before John can get at it, because he knows John, and he knows John was nearly about to make a grab for it.

He grins. "Curt, if you were born a girl, I would've married you ten times over."

"Hey, I wear the pants in this marriage. If anyone's the girl, it's you." He puts a hand on John's shoulder and starts leading him over to the table with the rest of them. "C'mon. Guys are waiting for you."

The rest of the night passes by without incident. He's dancing with someone pretty when the shots suddenly hit him, and she graciously exits after a few too many sloppy moves ending in stepped-on toes. Crank laughs loudly at his misfortune, Benny gives him a sympathetic pat on the back, and when the night ends Curt sticks around to stumble back to base with him.

The worst part about being a queer is that far too often it leads to silence, and John does not handle silence well. Curt knows this

because he asked John as much, only a few days after that conversation in the alley, in one of those quiet moments between dinner and lights out. Any other man might've left it alone. Not Curt. Curt makes conversation to make noise. Curt sometimes takes his hand and holds it.Curt will play one more round of poker as long as it's John who's asking.

He pulls rank to go through the flight logs. Somehow, not a single navigator marked when the fort went down. Not a single one.

He doesn't know the time of death, but he does know when Curt hit that RAF dick: 2215. He knows this because Curt checked his watch a few minutes after, pointed to Crosby, and said, "2215. RAF went down, mark it in the log, Croz!" and Crosby laughed nervously in that way he does, their hats piled up in his arms, and John laughed, too, his arm still around Curt's shoulder.

Eventually, he gets his wish. Gale punches him in the face.

He doesn't really expect Gale to fall for it, just like he doesn't really expect the boys to just stand there and watch. He hears his mother's voice in the back of his head: *When are you going to learn, John? Your actions have consequences.*

A trickle of blood makes its way to his lips. He tastes iron. It feels familiar on his tongue from all the times he has screamed himself hoarse in his life — in joy, in fury, in anguish. He'd scream now if he could, if their guards weren't trigger happy. If they weren't eyeing him like he's a madman. The men — *his* men — look at him the same, like he should be in a padded room and a straightjacket, and he doesn't understand how they don't see that he's basically already there in every way that matters. He lost control of the plane a long time ago.

Later that night, when lights are out and some of the boys are stuck in their dreams, Buck crawls out of his bunk and taps John on the shoulder. He has to roll away from the wall to face him. It's too dark

to make out his expression.

“I’m sorry,” Buck whispers.

“What for?”

“Punching you.”

John can’t help the grin that spreads over his face. “For Christ’s sake, has that really been keeping you up?”

Buck takes a deep breath, which means something John cannot decipher.

“You know, Curt got me there. Punched me in the same spot. Just ‘cause I asked him to.” He pauses, in case Buck has anything to say to that, then continues when he doesn’t. “I’m really not worth the grief, Buck.”

For a second, John is certain that Buck is just going to walk away. Instead, he takes his hand from where it’s resting on the thin mattress and brings it up to John’s face. His knuckles brush softly against the tender skin on the side of his nose where there is surely still dried blood. He presses down, and it hurts, but John doesn’t dare move.

It doesn’t matter. Gale jerks his hand back anyway. He hovers awkwardly for a moment, then says, “That’s not up to you,” before going back to his bunk.

The only man who knew about his dreams died somewhere in Nazi-occupied Europe. Or is currently dying. John doesn’t know. It doesn’t matter much, whether Curt is dead or dying. The point is, he’s not alive.

He wants to write to the Biddicks, but there’s nothing he can say. “Curt was one of the best friends I’ve ever had. Curt was the only one who could look right through to the center of me and not look away. Curt saw the great, gaping maw of my heart and bought me a beer.” He doesn’t want to tell anyone about that anyway. He wants to keep it to himself. It’s selfish, maybe, but that’s nothing new for him.

It’s fitting that Curt shows up in his dreams. Lake Michigan is,

apparently, reserved for Buck, but Curt gets to sit on the porch of his parents' place and smoke a cigarette. When he speaks, John can't hear him. Curt gets confused, says whatever he said again, and waves his hands around like that will help John understand. His eyes are sad. When John reaches out to touch him, he wakes up.

He didn't used to dream this much. He asked the army doctor about it once, his voice small like a child's, and the doctor looked back sympathetically, sad the way a father might be, and said, "I think that might just be the war, son."

His expression stood in stark contrast to the dream he'd had a few nights before, which was just a memory of stumbling home drunk to his father sitting in the armchair in the living room, anger simmering on his face, silence smothering the house. Then a bomb hit the house, and John woke up.

Bombs interrupt most of his dreams. It's either bombs or flak. Nearly every night, it seems, someone he knows and loves is ripped open, shrapnel cutting across their face or body, revealing their insides. John knows what blood and guts looks like now, and it's all the same in every body.

Buck is in his dreams more than most, but he rarely dies. It's like John's mind doesn't quite understand the concept, so it gets as close to the edge as it can.

Once, he dreams that he is kissing Buck, slow and sweet, and he tastes like the soda he's always drinking, and his bare chest is warm under John's palms. Even in dreams, John knows this is impossible, so he kisses deeper, he rolls his hips down, his grip tightens. And as he presses himself close to Buck, he feels it — something slick and warm. He pulls back and sees it. There's a gash along Buck's stomach, and his hand has slipped in. Buck screams in agony when John jerks his hand back. He tries to say something that sounds like John's name, but blood is filling his throat and it just sounds like he's drowning in it.

When he wakes up from this dream, he looks over across the two feet that separate his and Gale's bunks and watches the rise and fall of his chest. He's alive, he thinks to himself, over and over again for hours until the sun rises. Gale Cleven is still alive.

Nothing's new. His co-pilot's face half blown off. A fellow captive's skull split open by a shovel. Someone else's blood splattered on his face, mixing with his own. Nothing's new.

The pounding in his head isn't new. Neither is the clawing in his stomach, the ache in his legs and his ribs, the way his lungs feel like they're getting punctured every time he breathes. The way he keeps running and running and running and running. Light pulses and fades before his eyes in a pattern he does not recognize as the passage of time. In fact, he has slipped out of time itself. He is beyond help. He is beyond the reach of the world.

He's a corpse in every sense except literal, and this is why he hears ghosts in the whistle of the wind. None of the ghosts sound like Gale, a thought as comforting as it is frightening. He wonders what would happen if he slipped further away, if that would bring him closer to his friend or push them further away. He wonders if *I love you* is a slippage itself, if that's why, even when he touches Gale, even when he holds onto him, there's a canyon between them. Or maybe not a canyon. Maybe he can just feel every molecule of air, every particle in the atmosphere, every atom that holds their planes up until they don't. Maybe he has always had a foot outside the world. Maybe the fucking and the drinking is his way of scratching at the door, begging to be let in.

He falls to the ground because his legs can't withstand the siren song of gravity, and on the way down he feels the air part around him, forming a pocket of space-time for him to slide into. He lets it happen, because he needs to change his tactics. Stop resisting it, start going with it. Slip further and further away, deeper and deeper into the universe. Eventually, he will end up on the other side of it. Somewhere along the way, he will find Gale again.

His sister walks in as he's deciding whether or not it's worth it to unpack for two days leave, and she sits on his bed next to the duffel.

"Scram," he says, more out of habit than anything else. He kicks her leg lightly, and she kicks back hard enough to make him wince. " *Ow* , Christ's sake, Annie."

"Don't kick me," she says. "You've got mail. Who's Marjorie Spencer?"

The envelope was sitting on his desk when he walked in, on top of a small stack of mail that John figured was mostly his old college drinking buddies wondering where the hell he got off to. He's been steadfastly ignoring it.

"A buddy's sweetheart," he says. He thinks he sounds casual enough, but the look Annie gives him says otherwise. "It's probably a Christmas card."

"Sure." She keeps staring at him as he takes out his neatly folded shirt, then pants, then his toothbrush. "You didn't do anything stupid, did you?"

He leans his head back and groans. "Annie, for the love of God—"

"Did you?"

" *No* , I did not," he says. She's still looking at him skeptically, so he adds, "That's my best friend's girl, Annie, Jesus."

"Right."

She clearly wants to say more, but their mother calls for them from the bottom of the stairs, and they roll their eyes in unison, and he kicks her out and shuts the door.

It's just the four of them for dinner: ma and pa, Johnny and Annie. Annie's fiancé (John can't remember his name — Billy maybe? Benny?) goes to midnight mass with his family on Christmas Eve, so he doesn't join them. Tomorrow, the Egans will forgo their Christmas traditions to celebrate with Billy/Benny's family in a gesture of goodwill, but it's mostly because John's not sure if he can get leave for the wedding, or if he'll even be in the country, so this is might be the last time both families can be together.

His mom is pissed as hell about it and pretending not to be, and his dad is asking about how John likes the military. It's not the military he likes, it's the feeling of flying, the adrenaline rush, the intellectual work, the science and the math he never really cared about in school coming alive when he's in the air, the boys in the fort with him. One boy in particular. He tries to say as much, and his dad says, "The discipline is good for you. I can tell."

He takes a long drink of water and wishes it were alcohol. Annie asks Dad to pass the carrots.

Afterward, while his mom's washing the dishes, John escapes to the back porch to smoke a cigarette, and Annie joins him. She's six years younger, so they've never been very close. There was a brief moment after she graduated where they started talking to each other like real people, but it was nipped in the bud when John enlisted.

He knows they'd get along if they tried. She's sharp as a whip, kind but not particularly nice. He thinks if he told her about Gale she would understand. It's on the tip of his tongue.

She plucks the pack of cigarettes and lighter out of his hands and lights one for herself.

"Since when do you smoke?" he asks, snatching his pack back.

"I started before you left," she says. She grins slyly and adds, "Where do you think all your packs were going?"

He barks out a laugh. "Shit, I thought I was going crazy misplacing them." He then remembers the last letter his mother sent him and starts laughing again. "So that's what Mom was talking about in her last letter. She said she was worried about your 'behavior.'"

Annie groans. "Jesus. She thinks Bobby's a bad influence. He doesn't even smoke."

Bobby , that's the fiancé's name. "Is that why she's mad about Christmas?" he asks.

"Yeah. By the way, I didn't get you a present."

"I was just going to give you a couple dollars and call it a day."

"Cheers." They are silent for a few moments, and then she says, "What did you tell her?"

"What about?"

"My…" She waves the hand holding the cigarette around. "You know. 'Behavior.'"

She's avoiding his gaze, staring down at her feet. John doesn't know if his being a problem child made it easier or harder for her to do what she wants. Maybe it's just that their father takes it out on John, and their mother takes it out on Annie.

"I told her you're probably fine," he says. "Might be a bit hypocritical

of me if I said anything else."

Annie nods and takes a deep drag of her cigarette. She then looks up at him, her expression a bit too knowing. "You can tell me anything, you know."

He sighs. "If this is about Marge, I can open the letter in front of you. I promise it will be the blandest Christmas greetings you've ever read."

"Don't be a jerk. I know when you're lying," Annie says, her voice hard. "I don't know if it's about this 'Marge' girl or what, but you're obviously hiding something. I'm just trying to be nice, okay? I won't be an asshole about it."

For whatever reason, he doesn't shoot her down immediately. He's quiet for a few moments as he tries to force himself to say anything, his cigarette burning away, and her expression slowly gets softer.

"Come on, Johnny," she says gently. "What's wrong?"

It's on the tip of his tongue. Then his mother opens the door.

"We're doing coffee and presents," she says. When she sees the cigarette in Annie's hands, she frowns. "Oh, goodness, Annie, really?"

John takes the escape. "Let me get them out of my bag," he says, slipping past her easily. He feels Annie's eyes on him as he walks away.

They don't have another chance to talk about it. The next day is Christmas, and John's taking the train back to base the day after that.

The Telergma base is a shithole. For one thing, it's still pretty French, and for another, the beer is both warmer and sandier than the beer in England. He wasn't expecting any beer at all, but it's bad enough that it only serves to piss John off. He drinks it anyway.

Buck finds him nursing his warm beer outside, watching the sun sink over North Africa. John is mostly just trying to enjoy the view and the warmth and feel the briefest moment of peace, and he's doing pretty okay at it until Buck sits down heavily beside him.

He sits closer than he usually does, their shoulders brushing, and John chalks it up to exhaustion. He doesn't say anything, so John tries for a joke.

"Want a sip?" he says, holding out the bottle.

Buck's lips twitch, which is as good as a smile. "No, thanks," he says.

"Smart choice. It's got sand in it."

"Then why're you drinking it?"

John laughs. "I'm an alcoholic. Haven't you noticed?"

The joke is a gamble. It's fifty-fifty whether Buck will think it's funny or give him a disapproving, "I'm-not-mad-I'm-disappointed" look that John really doesn't have the patience for right now. He could play it safe, but that's never really been modus operandi.

The stars are aligned; Buck smiles. "Must have missed it," he says.

"Come on, Buck," John jokes, shaking his head. "If you aren't looking out for me, then who's going to?"

Curt , his mind supplies, and he immediately takes a deep sip of his sandy beer.

The sad reality of the joke is that it's true. If Buck isn't looking out for Bucky, then no one is. John doesn't know what Gale sees on his face at that moment, but it's enough to concern him. It's enough to move Gale to place a calloused hand over John's and gently push the bottle down. They've been in wet English soup for so long that John is startled by how warm Gale's skin is against his. Stiflingly warm. This is what enables Gale to take the bottle out of John's hands. He stands up, and John watches as he walks ten yards out into the desert, pours the rest of the beer out into the sand, and then throws the bottle as far as he can.

Gale does not sit down again when he returns. When John looks up at him, the dying sunlight lights a halo around his figure, and this is what makes John think it's a trick of the light or his own heart that makes him see a flicker of doubt, or something approaching it, pass over Gale's face.

It hangs in the air for a tense moment until Gale holds out a hand to pull John up.

“The boys will be looking for you,” Gale says.

It’s a lie they both see through. John takes Gale’s hand anyway.

He comes back to base as the sun is setting. After he drops his bag on his bunk and gives a miserable Meatball a few head scratches, he heads up into a fort and starts drinking.

Or rather, he continues drinking. He starts drinking the second he gets off the phone — he found a pub and ordered two shots of vodka before going back to the hotel to pack, and after he checked out he had a few fingers of bourbon at the hotel bar. He drank the entirety of his flask on the train ride back. He hasn’t been sober all day. With any luck, he won’t be sober again for hours.

He sits there and imagines he was up in the German skies with Gale. In the same plane, even. John would be crouched right behind him, and he would watch Gale fly, and when the going got rough, Gale would turn around and lock eyes with John, and they would know what they had to do.

He doesn’t want to die but he doesn’t want to be alive. He doesn’t want to die but he wishes he went down, too. It’s not right that Gale can die hundreds of miles away from him, or that he can die hundreds of miles away from Gale. It’s against nature. Like Newton’s laws of gravity, there should be a law of John Egan. Gale Cleven can write it however he wants.

Gale’s body could be making its way through Germany right now, or it could be buried in a mass grave, or it could be trapped in wreckage like a giant metal coffin. It could be sitting right where John’s body is sitting right now. He drinks some more.

When Ken finds him, he’s not really in his body anymore. Through grief and alcohol, he’s transcended it.

Jefferson joins him in the yard one day when it’s warm and raining

and everyone else is sitting inside. He puts the bucket he's using as a stool next to where John is sitting in the mud, head tilted up towards the gray sky above them.

"Shit weather for a picnic," he says.

John laughs. "You need food for a picnic. What, did you bring me some?"

"Sorry, sir, but I left the sandwiches inside." Jefferson smiles carefully. John imagines it's the same careful smile that shrinks and nurses in loony-bins give the patients in straight-jackets, but it doesn't seem like Jefferson is going to try to get him inside or to act more normal or any of the shit John's used to, so he doesn't look for buttons to push.

"That's too bad," he says. "I've been craving wet sandwiches."

"Is that why you come out here, sir?"

John raises an eyebrow. "Come on, Jefferson," he says, "I thought you were smarter than that."

Jefferson shrugs, though he doesn't seem much put out. "Worth a shot. And Alex is just fine, sir."

"In that case, Alex, you can drop the 'sirs.'"

"Okay." He lets the silence stretch out for a few moments more, and John can see the gears turning in his brain as he tries to think of a way to reapproach the problem that is Major Egan.

Fuck that.

"You like baseball, Alex?"

For his part, Alex doesn't seem too surprised with the change in conversation. "Sure."

"What's your team?"

"Tigers."

John tsks. "Yankees are where it's at."

Alex grins. "I grew up in Detroit. Can't very well leave them in the dust, can I?"

“I think exceptions could be made for the greatest team in the world.”

“Not for me,” Alex says. “Does Major Cleven like baseball?”

His expression looks innocent enough, which is exactly how John knows he’s right where Alex wants him. He tries to answer simply: “No. He’s not much of a sports fan.”

“How’d you come to be friends with a man who doesn’t like baseball?”

John frowns. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

The rain, which had been coming down steadily since before Alex ever came out, starts to let up ever so slightly. Without the distraction of the wind whipping raindrops in his eyes, he can’t really ignore the feeling of mud caked on his hands. He feels dirtier than he ever has since arriving in this piece of shit camp.

“I wonder….” Alex trails off. When John looks up at him, he’s biting the inside of his cheek.

“Out with it,” John says. “I’m sitting in the rain covered in mud and shit. My day can’t possibly get worse.”

Alex smiles thinly. “It just seems like you’re close to Major Cleven,” he says carefully. “I’m wondering why he’s not the one out here with you.”

Well, he thinks, it’s because Gale is tired of him. He never signed up for this: not John’s desperate pining, and certainly not his crazed outbursts. It’s been a long time coming. John has been slowly eating away at Gale’s patience for years now, and at some point he was going to snap and cut John off entirely. Even without getting punched in the face, it was an easy enough conclusion to come to.

Alex hadn’t seen that, though. There’s something appealing about there being a person in the world who sees the shadow left of his and Buck’s friendship and thinks it’s still real and solid.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he says.

Alex nods, looking down at his hands. They have something black smudged all over them. It might be graphite. John has seen him scribbling something in a notebook, and he is ashamed that he hasn’t tried figuring out what it is.

“You really don’t have to stay out here,” John says quietly. “I just can’t stand staying in those fucking barracks all day. I’m sure the boys are playing a mean game of poker right now.”

Alex shrugs. “I’m not all that good at poker,” he says, seated firmly on his bucket.

Over the course of the next hour and a half, the rain tapers off. Alex starts drawing in the mud, and John watches as planes and their myriad parts start emerging around them. Every so often, when Alex runs out of space, one of them moves, and an engine takes their place. Eventually, they wipe the drawings away and head back inside.

It’s poker, as John expected. Instead of asking to be dealt in, he sits behind Buck and keeps up a running commentary of all of Buck’s cards that forces him to fold within five minutes. He sighs, the boys laugh, and John grins.

As the game finishes up, Buck leans back. Under his breath, he asks, “You okay?”

“Never better,” John says. In his periphery, he sees Buck looking up at him. He ignores it.

When Polina leaves, he feels her lips against his forehead the same way he can imagine the feel of a German gun pressed to his temple. A ghost is a sort of premonition.

He stares at the patterned carpet until it’s seared into his retinas, and then he looks up at the ceiling and lets his eyes play tricks on him. The dip in the mattress where she slept is still warm. He moves over so his body is lying exactly where hers was. It ends up making him feel even more alone.

In his life he has run the entire spectrum of mornings-after three times over, but even the worst of them didn’t feel like this. Maybe it’s because he’s on another continent, maybe it’s the sirens wailing outside, maybe it’s the fact that he’s been abandoned two times over. It doesn’t help knowing that she likes him too much, the same way it doesn’t help knowing that Buck wants to be friends despite everything John tries to say. Everyone seems to like John well enough to hang

around him. No one seems to like him enough to stay.

It's because he wants. He knows this vaguely. He couldn't put words to it if he tried. But he wants, he wants, he wants, anything and everything. The sky's the limit. He knows this because he's touched the sky. He's touched the sky sitting in the cockpit next to the man he wants, and he's seen the sun slant in through the windows and light his eyes up like glass and spin his eyelashes into gold. When they touched down, he grinned so broadly it made John's head spin. His desire stretches to the deepest parts, ones he can't reach by himself.

There has to be someone out there who can reach him. There has to be someone who wants to.

"Have you ever wanted anything?" John asks.

Buck laughs. It rings clear like a choir bell into the night. "No," he jokes, "can't say I have."

This, John thinks, is what a bomb feels like when it's falling from one of their planes on a path of ruin.

"You're not missing anything," he says. "It feels like shit. I feel like it's always crawling up my throat. Whenever I'm around you, it's the only thing I can think about."

The smile has completely disappeared from Buck's face when John risks looking over. "John," he says, voice pitched like a warning. It confirms John's suspicions. It does not make him feel any better.

"At least you're not the first." He looks Buck in the eyes, so he'll see the sad little smile on his lips and maybe, by some miracle, take pity on him. "I've been a guy's first, and when I woke up the next morning I found him in the bathroom vomiting and praying. At least neither of us have to worry about that."

"John." This time it sounds like a broken plea. It's more emotion than John's ever heard out of Buck, and that ravenous thing in him opens its jaws.

"I know there's no chance," he continues, "but I can't — Buck, it's

eating me alive." A desperate laugh crawls out of his throat, and suddenly he can longer face Buck, whose expression has shut off so completely that they might as well be strangers. "Every fucking day, I look at you and I think—"

"Stop it," Buck says sharply. "Stop it."

Out of the corner of his eye, John sees the hard clench of Gale's jaw, the stern set of his brows. His hands itch for a beer bottle, a flask, a shot glass — hell, he'd take a cigarette at this point. But he's holding himself to sobriety. He knows, in a vague sense, that Gale does not like alcohol, and he had hoped sobriety might work in his favor tonight.

"Would if I could, buddy," John says quietly.

Gale sucks in a deep breath. "That's not—" he starts. It seems like he has no idea where to go from there. In any other circumstance, John would be quietly pleased that he has rendered Gale speechless, unsure. Even in these circumstances, something in him delights in how it hurts.

Finally, Gale stands up. "You're drunk," he says.

This is what gets John to look at him again. "What? I haven't had a single—"

"Or you're not well," Gale continues. "Not in your right mind. This isn't — it's not real, John."

John gapes at him. Like a switch flips in him, the shock and despair suddenly turns into a searing anger. He stands up and immediately shoves Gale back. Frustratingly, he merely stumbles. He does not fall.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" he snaps. "Really, Buck? Are you that fucking dense?"

"How is this fair to me?" Gale shoots back.

John laughs bitterly. "Fuck you. Fair to *you* ? How is this fair to *me* ?"

"It's for the best," Gale says. Insists, rather.

John is no stranger to that steely look in his eyes. He understands instantly that nothing he says will get Gale to budge, that he is already forgetting this night ever happened, that all the ranting and raving in

the world will never bring this conversation back, at least not in any way that matters. Gale has made up his mind for the both of them. John could kill him for it.

He fishes the keys to the army jeep out of his pockets and throws them at Gale. Gale makes no effort to catch them; they hit his chest and fall to the ground.

“Take the jeep back to base,” he says. “I’ll walk.”

“It’s five miles, Bucky—”

“Swear to God, Buck, if I’m stuck in that car with you, I’ll kill you.”

It looks like Gale is going to try to protest, but he drops it like he drops every other goddamn thing. John watches him as he picks up the keys, gets in the car, and drives away.

Four months later, he is called to the front.

In the hours following the escape, John replays everything in his mind. The sounds and images flicker on the back of his eyelids like a film projected. The click of the rifle. The freezing burn of its metal barrel. The full weight of another rifle slamming into his ribs, which never quite healed right the first time around, so his every breath shakes and rattles in his lungs. Gale, a shadowy figure in his periphery, standing stock still. When John told him to run, it was like the words were being torn out of his throat.

They don’t get goodbyes, is the thing. It’s like someone keeps cutting off John’s limbs with no warning, like whatever sick fuck in charge of the world gets a kick out of watching him stumble around haplessly.

He got so close, is the thing. He was so fucking close.

He can still feel Buck’s hands gripping his jacket, the warm puff of his breath as he said, “Look at me. I’m in.” He still feels men jostling into him as the train moves, as he watches Gale’s eyes shift, and he can’t quite look at him and he can’t quite look away when Gale tells him life would be rougher without him. The *I love you* is still lodged in his throat, trying to force its way out, the same way it had been for years,

and just this once, for one single moment in all the five years they'd known each other, Gale might have let him say it. They were almost there. He almost said it.

If the stars were out, if Germany wasn't perpetually being smothered by a blanket of clouds, John would have searched for Orion and his dog. Gale told him once that you can only see them in winter and that Canis Major is usually running along the horizon line. Gale told him this at Thorpe-Abbotts while playing fetch with Meatball, while John was watching the pair of them, so far gone it was laughable. Thorpe-Abbots seems years away, but he remembers with startling clarity how, when his train arrived from London, Meatball got up from Benny's bunk, sniffed John, whined, trotted over to Gale's bunk, and whined again, like he was asking John where his people went.

"I wish I knew," he said.

John wakes up at night to a persistent shoving. He startles, thinking it's another German hellbent on killing him, panicking at the hands settling on his shoulders, until he hears a familiar language and a familiar accent. "It's me, John. It's just Gale."

"Shit," John whispers. It's too dark to make out Gale's face, and frankly he's too tired to bother trying. He flops back down, closes his eyes, and tries to ignore the pounding in his head.

"Can you move?" Gale murmurs. "Just a bit to the right."

John hums and scoots his body over. Gale crawls in the bed beside him. He doesn't question it.

"You look like hell," Gale says after a moment.

John laughs weakly. "I feel like hell, too."

"What happened?"

"Tell you later."

"Alright."

John is present enough to be aware that there are other guys in here,

and they could well be awake and listening, but he's too dazed to actually care. "I told you, Buck," he whispers. "I told you it'd be you and me."

Buck says nothing. John's used to it — to these silences, to not knowing where he stands. It doesn't matter. He'll give himself until he's empty.

Sleep pulls him in again. As he approaches unconsciousness, he feels the ghost of a hand settle gently on his cheek.

He wakes up to an empty bed.

End Notes

thx for hanging! drop a kudos and comment if u want, im not the boss of you <3

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